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## Navigating Shifting Sands: Library Redesign in a Time of Uncertainty

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# NAVIGATING SHIFTING SANDS: LIBRARY REDESIGN IN A TIME OF UNCERTAINTY

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## Abstract:

La Trobe University is undergoing transformative change. A new strategic plan with goals to double research income and increase technology-enabled online and blended learning provides the context for a new University operating model; reduced government funding is challenging us to work in a much more cost effective way. The Library's challenge in this time of change is to develop a flexible model for service delivery which closely aligns with the University's strategies and meets changing student needs, and a cost-effective operating model which enables us to be agile, resilient and respond rapidly and proactively to change. The University's change process is enabling us to make bold changes in this time of uncertainty so we are taking the opportunity to build 'from the ground up', focusing on the value and impact of library services on student outcomes and research quality. Our organisational design process has challenged us to rethink traditional structures and services, and to identify new ways of working collaboratively, not only across teams within the library, but across the university. A review of our services has highlighted the importance of working in partnership with students and academics and led us to redefine our service model so that our clients truly are at the centre of everything we do. We are also refining our work processes to allow us to redirect our time and energy to the most important focus of our work – our clients. This paper will explore the challenges of redesigning service models and structures which can operate effectively in times of financial restraint and allow us to anticipate, adapt and respond to changing needs and trends over time.

**Keywords:** Library, organisational design, restructuring, organisational change.

## Introduction

La Trobe University is a multi-campus university in Victoria, Australia, established in 1964 as the third university in the state of Victoria. Since the university opened in 1967, the student population has grown to more than 26,000, of which 18% are postgraduates and 23% are international students. The main campus of La Trobe is located in the Melbourne suburb of Bundoora; the university has four other campuses located in Victorian regional locations at Bendigo, Albury-Wodonga, Mildura and Shepparton as well as a campus in the city centre of Melbourne.

La Trobe offers undergraduate and postgraduate study across five faculties: Education; Health Sciences; Humanities and Social Sciences; Business, Economics and Law; and Science, Technology and Engineering. In the 2012 [Excellence in Research for Australia \(ERA\)](#) assessment of research strengths across the sector, La Trobe University was rated at or above world standard in 38 specific disciplines. It is particularly recognised for its research strengths in biochemistry and cell biology research, biological sciences, condensed matter physics, human movement and sports science, history and archaeology, and language, communications and culture.

In 2012, under the leadership of a new Vice-Chancellor, the performance and positioning of the University was reviewed in some detail. This review provided the background for the development of the future direction of the University at a time of great change in the tertiary education sector in Australia and globally. The outcome of this review was a new five year strategic plan, known as *Future Ready 2013-2017*, which sets out a bold vision for the University that aims to return La Trobe to its radical beginnings, but reinterpreted in a modern context. The vision outlined in the *Future Ready* strategic plan is that:

*'La Trobe will be a University known for its excellence and innovation in relation to the big issues of our time, and for its enthusiasm to make a difference. La Trobe will be one of the top*

*three Universities in Victoria, one of the top dozen nationally and one of the top 300 internationally.'*

The *Future Ready 2013-2017 Strategic Plan* focuses on:

- Building on the University's research strengths by establishing Research Focus Areas: five major University-wide, cross-disciplinary research programs which address significant global problems, in which we will be amongst the best in the world
- Increasing the use of technology-enabled online learning and the development of core graduate capabilities
- Developing a distinctive curriculum framework for learning and teaching, the La Trobe Framework, to provide an attractive and relevant curriculum and student experiences
- Developing strategic educational and research partnerships
- Engaging with the areas surrounding the University in Melbourne's north and promoting educational opportunity in Victoria's regions.

The Strategic Plan has specific goals to:

- Grow from 26,000 to 33,000 students (Equivalent Full Time Student Load)
- Double our research income
- Improve La Trobe's international research-based institutional ranking
- Develop deep and mutually beneficial partnerships with schools and vocational education and training providers across all our campuses
- Improve effectiveness and efficiency in the use of resources to support the core activities of teaching and research.

### **Challenges in a changing higher education environment: La Trobe's response**

Like all Australian universities, La Trobe University faces challenges in the current environment. La Trobe's specific challenges are:

- Government budget cuts have led to a reduction in central funding
- Competition for student enrolments due to increased volatility and competition in the tertiary sector, both domestically and internationally
- The need for funding to meet ongoing maintenance requirements and for the refurbishment of teaching and research infrastructure
- Increases in non-controllable costs, such as insurance.

To respond to these challenges, and to reposition La Trobe to meet strategic goals, the university has begun a program of transformative change. Known as *Funding Future Ready*, this program has been established to ensure that we have the funds and capability to reinvest in our future so that we can realise our strategic goals by 2017. The *Funding Future Ready* program is a University-wide program which will result in a new operating model and structure for the university, and release substantial funds to support the ongoing development required.

The *Funding Future Ready* program has provided us with a timely opportunity to review our library operating model and services to identify improvements, and also reduce our expenditure. While this is a challenge, the *Funding Future Ready* program provides us with the impetus to make major changes at a time when the entire university is undergoing change. We have decided to seize this opportunity to implement a new service model and staffing structure which will provide us with the flexibility to implement ongoing improvements in the future, and the agility to respond to a changing environment in line with changing client needs.

The University Library at La Trobe is well-regarded within the university and viewed as progressive in its approach to the provision of scholarly information services. However, while the Library has a quality framework and has continuously implemented service improvements, there have been relatively few staffing restructures in the last two decades. A review of services in mid-2013 involving a large number of library staff had identified new and improved ways in which services could be offered and highlighted those services which are of high (and low) value to our clients. This service review also highlighted the gap between existing library

services and the university's strategic directions, particularly in learning, teaching and research. It became obvious that, in order to respond to changes in pedagogy, technology and emerging research needs, we needed to reframe our services and restructure our workforce. We required new skills and capabilities, such as those identified by Auckland (2012) and Jaguszewski and Williams (2013), to deliver online support for learning and teaching, to respond to the changing information needs of researchers and to contribute successfully to the University's strategy.

### **Beginning the journey: aligning our strategy**

The University's *Future Ready* Strategic Plan describes a clear vision for La Trobe students and staff:

'La Trobe students will choose us .... because we respect them as partners in their learning; because we are flexible and innovative in our modes of delivery; and because we equip them with an identifiably modern, globally relevant education....

Our staff will be highly skilled and motivated, creative and ground-breaking... people who pursue new ideas. Risk-taking, creativity and innovation in teaching and research will be supported and encouraged.'

The Strategic Plan provided a clear direction for developing library strategies. We need to be partners in learning and research, deliver our services in flexible and innovative ways, be creative and take risks. As Troll (2002) identified more than a decade ago, to prepare effectively for the future, we need to understand our changing role in the university and continually re-evaluate and thoroughly re-examine library assumptions and practices. To focus on our changing role and re-examine our assumptions, we engaged key library staff in a formal planning exercise. We used a structured approach to analyse our current state and identify a path to our preferred future state, where the library is clearly recognised as an advantage to the university and contributes in a measurable way to successful teaching, learning and research. The hindrances to success identified during this planning exercise - funding challenges, lack of disengagement from work that is no longer relevant and allowing history to define how we approach the present - were not a surprise. The need for change was clearly articulated, and the existing drive for change within the University provided an environment in which to think creatively about change and take a fresh approach to developing a new staffing structure and services.

### **Re-examining our services**

While the library has a range of excellent services to support learning, teaching and research, our services needed to clearly reflect the move within the university to online and blended learning and the increased emphasis on research. We wanted to be clear – and make clear to others – how the library aligns with the University's strategies and adds value to the learning, teaching and research processes and outcomes. The purpose of our services, and the value they add, was obvious to us but surveys, feedback and anecdotal evidence indicated that this was not always obvious to our clients. We had a clear message from researchers: they are time poor; they want services to be visible and available to them where and when they need them and they need these to be clearly relevant to their research needs. The *Future Ready* strategy focuses on building research, implementing a distinctive curriculum and increasing online and blended learning. To provide a context for our services and articulate their value to our clients, we have developed two frameworks, one centred on learning and teaching and the other on research. The Learning and Teaching Partnership Framework and the companion Research Partnership Framework describe the relevance of library services to our users in their terms. The Frameworks demonstrate how we will embed services in learning and research workflows and provide them at point of need, integrated with relevant services provided by other areas of the university. In learning and teaching, we will focus on building learning partnerships, embedding library learning and information literacy skills in the curriculum and measuring the impact of these on student learning and success. With the projected growth in student numbers, we need to make these services scalable so will increasingly deliver skills training online. To improve our services and enhance support for research, we will place a greater emphasis on forming partnerships to better understand researchers' needs and behaviours, and identify opportunities to add value and make their work easier. Our goal of contributing to maximising

research outcomes will require the development of new knowledge and skills sets so that library staff have the expertise to provide training and advice in emerging areas such as research data management. Collaboration with other teams supporting research on campus to develop and provide coherent integrated support for researchers and research students at all stages of the research lifecycle is critical to our success in this area.

The University's *Learning and Teaching Plan* (2013) acknowledges the importance of both curricular and co-curricular learning, and we have recognised this in our review of services and our staffing restructure. In our review we identified potential changes to our co-curricular services, our traditional 'front desk' services. The *Learning and Teaching Plan* outlines a strategy to 'Develop a seamless experience for students through integrated support provided by student service areas'. We are capitalising on two key strengths of libraries - our ability to discover and manage information, and our strong customer service ethos – to directly contribute to the realisation of this strategy. We are now collaborating with the Student Administration unit to plan a joint service, located in the library, which will provide one point of contact for all student enquiries. This initiative capitalises on the skills and capabilities of library staff to deliver a quality student experience and has been the catalyst for the establishment of a customer service community of practice across the university and the development of close links between previously separate teams. It positions the library as a key player in the provision of services to students and showcases the library as the centre of campus life.

To develop this new service zone, we will employ a number of strategies. We are increasing self-service options for students by using a central, publicly-available knowledgebase, improving the information and support available online and increasing our span of virtual services such as live chat. We will reduce the number of separate service points, providing all services from one central point, and introduce a tiered 'triage' system so that students who use the service zone will be directed immediately to where their queries can be addressed. The staff in the service zone will have a range of expertise so that all questions can be responded to at this point of contact, using the knowledgebase and a customer relationship management system to track queries. The focus is on making it easy for students to find information, and answering questions at point of need – in person, by phone, chat or email. The development of this new service has been a catalyst for us to improve and streamline our processes; a number of improvements have been identified in our service review by library staff who are very aware of the confusion that our processes can cause our students. Proposed changes range from removing fines for items which are not in high demand to making physical items easier to locate.

### **Organisational design: building a structure**

The proposed changes to our service delivery model necessitated a change in our structure to enable new approaches to service development and delivery. We recognised that effective organisational design is essential to build an organisation that can respond to changing needs and remain financially viable. Designing a completely new structure was a challenging exercise, forcing us to let go of the existing structure and rethink the way in which we might organise our staff resources to deliver the best possible outcomes. The need for a new structure was driven by our need to align with the University's strategies and our new service model, and to reduce expenditure. To be successful, we needed to do more than move the boxes on an organisational chart and change reporting lines; we needed a structure that was purpose built to focus on delivering our strategies. Our design criteria for the structure outlined our aspirations: the structure must be flexible and allow for change and growth in skills and expertise, support cooperation and communication across the library (a 'no silos' approach), and provide opportunities for career progression to make the library an attractive employment destination. There were also more pragmatic, but equally important, criteria: there must be clear accountabilities and meaningful team names and job titles. The structure must be agile, resilient and promote engagement across teams, campuses and the university.

The University has a robust change management framework that provided a clear process for organisational design and change. The organisational design process, led by internal organisational development professionals, confirmed our strategic direction and purpose, captured our vision for the library as agreed through our planning process and analysed the strengths and weaknesses of our current state. Current work functions and activities were

mapped and clustered around purpose, and new functions and activities identified; all functions were benchmarked with other university libraries.

In considering possible new structures, we revisited the theory of organisational design and the models and themes this provides. We agreed to design our organisation 'from the ground up', starting with a blank sheet of paper and basing the design on our strategic objectives, not designing the organisation around existing structures or people (Kearns, 2011). The first step was to agree on a new operating model for the organisation, informed by our strategies. An operating model outlines the way in which people are expected to work within and across an organisational structure, often across traditional reporting lines, with varying degrees of autonomy and authority. After testing a range of possible models, we identified that the operating model which is the best fit for our library at this time is a 'customer' operating model (Stanford, 2007). In a customer operating model, the design is driven by customer need and delivered by teams, and the organisation is made up of work groups or self-managed teams. Our operating model is client-centred, structured around clients rather than library functions. We identified four key 'enablers' which will contribute to the delivery of our strategies and form the basis of our structure. These are:

- Learning and Teaching enablers to contribute to co-curricular and curricular learning
- Research enablers to deliver research partnerships and support
- Information enablers to provide access to information, through the library's collection and the collections of other institutions
- Strategy and connection enablers to contribute to strategy development, communication, quality assurance, client engagement and cross-campus collaboration.

Leadership is a key enabler across the entire operational model; our principle is that, while there will be a leadership team within the library, leadership can come from anywhere in the structure. To ensure that we were remaining true to our original requirements, our operational model was assessed against our design criteria and found to be a good fit; we believe the model provides flexibility and the ability to deliver the best outcomes for our clients. The model also supports our requirement for self-managed teams to operate across our campuses so that we can provide capacity at smaller campuses.

Identifying the operating model was, on reflection, the least challenging part of building a new structure. Our operating model provided a base for the structure; designing the structure has required the design team to put aside our current work practices and focus on how we wish to work in the future. We have had to consider the roles and skills required, without reference to the staff who might fill those roles. Similar roles are grouped into teams based on the key enablers we identified; teams are then aligned to ensure that collaboration and cross-team skilling can occur. The structure has deliberately been designed so that further refinements can occur without major disruption. We have been very conscious of avoiding what we termed 'single points of failure': roles in which only one person has the expertise and which then have the potential to cause issues for service continuity. Our aim in the new structure is to have expertise shared across a number of staff members, not only to avoid a point of failure but to provide career paths and development opportunities for staff. We have also recognised the need to allow for roles and skills we do not currently have in-house, such as instructional design skills, to support our strategies.

## **Managing change**

The work undertaken to identify our vision, purpose and a 'fit for purpose' structure contributes to, in Kotter's eight step model for change (1995), 'creating a climate for change'. The next phase in our change process is to engage with our staff and lead them through this change. We have communicated the sense of urgency for change and now need to ensure that we take time to plan our progress through the necessary phases of change, while maintaining our focus on completing the change by the end of 2014. We are, in Kotter's terms, now 'enabling action', very aware that we need to focus on the end game so that we see the change through to an outcome. It is critical that we recognise the importance of the human element in this change process and engage and support staff throughout the change. Such a major change, not only within the library, but across the university will take time and focused effort to implement and embed in day to day operations. We aim to achieve cultural change through this process so that

we can realise the vision in the university's strategic plan to develop highly skilled, creative and motivated staff who pursue innovation and new ideas.

Our measures of success for our change are clear. As an outcome of this change, our organisation will be:

- Client-centred: our clients will be at the centre of everything we plan and do
- Visible and clearly adding value; an important consideration in a time of financial constraint
- Aligned with the university's strategy
- Financially viable: lean, with resources allocated where they are most effective and services which are well used
- Agile and resilient: our staff will have the capacity and support to develop new skills and gain experience across functions and campuses.

## **Conclusion**

The process of redesigning service models and structures in a time of uncertainty – shrinking budgets, disruptive change in higher education – is challenging; it requires a fresh approach and a new way of thinking about our role in the university and the value we offer. To redesign a service model and structure which is able to respond flexibly and effectively to change, we are deliberately implementing a structure which is not based around library functions, but around the university's strategy and focus and our clients' needs. We are empowering staff through establishing clear accountabilities and developing self-managed teams, recognising that we will need to have clear reporting lines and strong management skills to ensure that this is a success. We need fluidity across teams so that we can respond to peaks and troughs in demand and manage the library with a lean workforce. Multiskilling and sharing expertise is key to the success of our structure.

While we have invested a great deal of time in researching and designing our structure, we know that there is no perfect structure; our structure needs to be fit for purpose and flexible to work. We have designed a structure to meet the library's and university's needs now but with the flexibility to accommodate ongoing changes. Our identified structure is right at this particular point in time but not static; we will continually anticipate and identify innovative and creative responses to our changing environment, so change will be a constant.

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